

## Loss issues in adoption

By Sarah Armstrong, Senior Manager, PARC

***'Grief is the emotional reaction to a loss' (Evelyn Robinson 2000)***

The Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) was established in 1991 to coincide with the implementation of the NSW Adoption Information Act 1990. There had been a considerable push for legislative change in the late 1980's from adoption professionals and consumers, with community consultation on the rights that such legislation should provide.

This process tapped into strong emotional responses from various groups affected by adoption - privacy issues, fear of discovery and the breaking of the secret, wishing to 'leave the past alone', fears of losing the relationships established through the adoption, fears of shaking the status quo, fears about the 'bad mother' coming back to claim her child etc.

The legislation was carefully written and widely publicised and was implemented in April 1991. It included provision for the protection of privacy for those who wished to place contact vetoes and yet left both of the central parties to the adoption - the adult adoptee and the natural mother - free to seek information and contact if they so wished, with lesser rights available to other members of the birth and adoptive families.

It is now 9 years since the legislation came in, and in that time approximately 20,000 people have sought adoption information which would allow them to contact each other. Also in that time, PARC has responded to 40,000 telephone counselling calls, as well as providing other counselling and groupwork services to thousands of individuals across the State.

PARC's services are available to anyone affected by adoption - adoptees, birth/natural parents, adoptive parents, siblings, spouses and other family members. Face to face counselling, therapeutic groups, intermediary services, information meetings. We also offer training for professionals, consultation to agencies and support groups, conduct research and have an extensive library on post-adoption issues.

Much of our work centres around grief and an exploration of past and present losses, though in many ways our focus is also a looking forward, in hope, to the forming of new family relationships and the strengthening of existing ones. More about hope later.

When PARC was established, it was recognised that, if the legislation was to succeed, there would have to be a recognition of the need for counselling, accurate information and professional help for those embarking upon this 'opening of Pandora's box', as it has often been referred to. To enter into a reunion with a birth family member, whatever the relationship, requires a leap of faith. It is often at this time of supposed joy and reconciliation, that buried griefs and nameless losses are unearthed. A birth mother may, with the sudden appearance of her lost son or daughter, be plummeted into the dark centre of the loss of her baby. She may have, for the past 20 or 30 years have found a way of living her life unmolested by this pain, or may have thought that she had worked through it sufficiently in the past. What is then perceived by all around her to be a time of pure joy, and the start of a new future, may for her be marred by the old grief which, it seems, now has a stronger hold than ever.

An adopted person may contact our Centre on finding that some trigger - the end of a relationship, the birth of their own child, the death of an adoptive parent - may leave them floundering, inundated by feelings of loss, that they may link to their adoption and need to explore.

An adoptive mother, faced with her son or daughter's growing interest in seeking contact with her original family, may find herself dealing with fears of the loss of her child, or issues relating to her own infertility.

With all of the joys that adoption reunion can bring - and there are many - there is always the complication of that marriage of the past and the present, the lost with found. From the outside, it may appear that reunion would be the happy end to the story. In our experience, however, it can be the beginning of another long road.

### **Grief & loss for natural mothers**

What, then, are the losses for the different parties to the adoption? We'll start with the mother who gave birth to the child - also known as the birth or natural mother. Much of the grief for the natural mother could also be said to apply to the natural father, though the specific instances pertaining to the pregnancy, birth and loss of the mother-child bond are hers alone. I propose to deal specifically with the losses for the natural mother, whilst not wishing to discount the very valid experience of pain of many birth fathers. The numbers of birth fathers coming to our Centre and registering interest in tracing their children is increasing. We are perhaps only now learning of the impact that the loss of fatherhood has had upon their lives.

*'Grief is the emotional reaction to a loss... The grief of the woman who has lost a child through adoption is a unique experience and differs in fundamental ways from other grief experiences' (Evelyn Robinson, from Adoption and Loss: The Hidden Grief)*

Women who lost their children to adoption suffered a myriad of losses - a loss of choice and a loss of power being amongst them. They also, importantly,

lost the connection between mother and child, formed during pregnancy. Even when natural mothers have experienced subsequent pregnancies and have raised further children, the original grief of the sudden separation between her and her child remain. For the majority of adoptions, separation occurred shortly after birth, with little or no time or opportunity for the mother to hold or nurse her baby. This refers largely to adoptions occurring in the 60's and 70's and does not reflect more recent practice. We now know more about the power of the bond between a mother and her unborn child and can perhaps better understand the damage done by that early separation. For many natural mothers, whose children were adopted during the 'closed adoption period', the birth gave them no closure. It was as if their child had not been born at all.

The grief of the natural mother is compounded by the public perception that she acted voluntarily and therefore must have a degree of comfort with her decision. Her pain may therefore be less valid, if her experience of loss is misunderstood.

They also experienced the loss of a concrete focus for the grief - unlike a death, mourning was not encouraged or truly understood. If a woman gives birth to a stillborn child, society has found ways, however inadequate, for marking the child's birth and mourning its passing. The anniversary can be meaningfully remembered and marked, and with the acknowledgment of the mother's loss, her very motherhood is also acknowledged. Most women whose children were adopted existed under a shroud of secrecy and silence. Nobody talked about the pregnancy, the birth, the baby, the adoption, the loss. It was expected that the mother would do likewise.

This silence lead many women to bury and repress their grief to such a degree that, when and if their son or daughter seeks them out in later life, the shock of suddenly exposing the feelings from that long ago event can be completely overwhelming. Even if birthmothers have themselves sought the contact, they may find that the reunion triggers a strong grief response. It is this overdue exposure of grief that may result in severe anguish and a loss of control for many women.

There is a common expectation that grief will diminish over time and, in the case of adoption, that it will disappear once reunion occurs. For many natural mothers, however, the effects of the loss are profound & long lasting, with the grief not behaving as grief is 'meant' to do! Grief and anger may actually increase rather than decrease, as an awareness of what has been lost is reached. This may be the experience of those who, on meeting their adult son or daughter, may now be able to imagine that child at age 2, 6 or 10 and have a real sense of the parenting that they have missed out on.

The adoption may have meant a loss of relationships with the natural father, with family members, with friends, as the adoption experience may have robbed the mother of her secure place within her network, perhaps also of her youth and opportunities. The loss of her child may impact on her ability to form other significant relationships, to trust and to mother subsequent

children. There have been studies, which give evidence that natural mothers are more likely to struggle with drug and alcohol abuse and mental health problems.

### **Grief and loss for adoptees**

*'The adopted child is always accompanied by the ghost of the child he might have been had he stayed with his birth mother and by the ghost of the fantasy child his adoptive parents might have had.'* (Journey of the Adopted Self, p11, Betty Jean Lifton)

Grief and loss for adoptees is complicated. On face value, they have had everything to gain by adoption. They were removed from a situation of uncertain parentage, possible economic hardship, prejudice and stigma. They were given to a handpicked family who desperately wanted a child and could provide for their needs. It was assumed that, out of the various parties to the adoption, the adoptee would have the simplest road to travel.

In our work at PARC, however, we have been able to unravel the very complex layers of loss described to us by adoptees. We have learnt of the struggle to establish a sense of identity, of self, when there is an inherent conflict between the two selves - the child born to the birth mother and the growing person raised in the adopted family. This is, for most adopted people, immensely difficult to express and to process. The lack of a true sense of identity can manifest itself in many ways - anxiety, fear of abandonment, rootlessness, insecurity, difficulties in maintaining lasting relationships, poor self image.

This grief is also often without a concrete focus, as the adoptee may have no memory of their previous family, yet may carry with them a sense of having lost these important links and relationships.

What do we really mean by a loss of identity? Adoptees may lack the very basis of an established sense of self. They don't know who they look like, they don't know where their talents come from, they don't have medical history, they don't have family information to pass on to their children, they don't have access to the story of their origins and their place in the world. For many adoptees, this may lead to a sense of not belonging anywhere, of having no true self.

The lack of security and feelings of having been abandoned may create fears of future abandonment and may make relationships unsafe territory. An adoptee does not necessarily grieve the separation from their natural mother, but may be fearful of losing love and approval, affecting the way they behave in the adoptive family, in friendships, at work and particularly in sexual relationships. The adoptee may also experience an anxious attachment to the adoptive family, and as a consequence have difficulty separating - this may present as over attachment, compliance, defensiveness, or a denial of their adoption status.

In theories about the impact of adoption, there is a belief that the adoptee is inherently damaged by the loss of the early relationship with the natural mother. This is difficult to be precise about, as much is conjecture, but the grief expressed by adoptees who have had a positive experience of adoption, can perhaps be seen as having its roots in their early experience of being separated from their mother. Nancy Verrier, in her book *The Primal Wound*, comprehensively explores the effects of this separation in a way that many adoptees have found helpful and descriptive of their experience.

Verrier speaks of the original 'abandonment' of the adoptee leading them to expect further abandonment and informs their ability to trust and to enjoy healthy adult relationships. This leads to testing out behaviour and feelings of rejection, insecurity and a nameless loss. Verrier describes this damaged adopted child at the time of separation from the mother as being *'hopeless, helpless, empty and alone'*.

*'the severing of that connection... causes a primal or narcissistic wound..which manifests in a sense of loss, basic mistrust, anxiety and depression, emotional and/or behavioural problems, and difficulties in relationships with significant others' (Verrier 1993)*

For some adoptees, who discover that their birthparents married and had further children, there is the added loss of a complete family, siblings and the joint identity that such a family group would seem to offer.

For cross-cultural adoption, there are the additional losses of cultural identity, loss of opportunities for reunion and perhaps even the lack of accurate information about their date of birth or the name of their mother. We are currently writing a book, *The Colour of Difference*, on the particular experiences of cross-cultural adoption, and we are only starting to uncover the added complexities of this type of adoption. It is particularly important to understand these issues, with the majority of new Australian adoptions being of intercountry children.

Perhaps one of the greatest losses for adoptees is the loss of ability to feel secure and free from the burden of gratefulness. Adoptees have suffered at the hands of society's assumptions that they are almost certainly better off adopted than raised by their birth family. It is difficult to imagine a way that this could be definitively known.

### **Grief and loss for adoptive parents**

*'The death of a loved one, the loss of a limb, the loss of a job, are more tangible than the loss of something that never existed - my unborn children.'*  
(from *'Teddy Bear in the Corner'* by Ann James)

This quote from an adoptive mother of two adult children clearly brings us to the key loss issue for most adoptive parents, that of their infertility. There is, however, much less written about the loss experience of the adoptive parents than of the other sides of the 'triangle'. Like adoptees, they were seen to be

the lucky ones, the receivers of the gift of a child. What they had lost along the way, what they would continue to lose, was rarely seen.

These adoptive parents suffer with the loss of the children they would have had - their 'fantasy child' (Lifton), the child that would have carried on their biological line, resembled them, formed the basis of future generations, reproduced themselves.

Infertility was a taboo subject until more recent years, when reproductive technology developments allowed it to be discussed more freely. Infertility issues may not have been resolved, or even addressed, at the time of the adoption. Adoptive parents have reported that, when being assessed as prospective adoptive parents, they were questioned on their infertility and that this may have been a painful and humiliating experience, but that the degree to which they had resolved the issues was dealt with perfunctorily, if at all. They also, particularly the mother, where it was often assumed that the infertility lay were made to feel blamed, imperfect, lacking somehow, for 'failing' to produce a child. There may have been little or no opportunity for exploring the grief of the infertility even with their partner or wider family; with the miscarriages, stillbirths or the unexplained failure to conceive being mourned in private and alone. Adoptive parents suffered with the code of silence in much the same way as did birth parents, with the pressure not to talk about the infertility being very real.

Over the years of raising their children, the infertility issues may be brought to the surface repeatedly by the various reminders of their non-biological relationship to their children - questions about their children's medical history that cannot be answered, remarks about the lack of resemblance between them and their children, telling their children about the adoption, the birth of grandchildren and, perhaps most forcefully, their children's reunion with birth family members. The pain of these continuing reminders, however necessary, can reinforce the negative power of the couple's infertility. In the past, some adoptive parents have found these issues so difficult that it has led them to deny the reality of the adoption. It is in these families that dangerous myths have grown; it is here that adoptees have not been told of their adoption and have been brought up literally 'as if born to' their adoptive parents. In our experience, this is not uncommon, and is almost always discovered at some stage, causing untold damage and anguish to all sides.

Adoptive parents have also suffered from the fallacy that raising an adopted child is identical to raising their own biological child. If this is taken on as a belief, the adoptive parent is poorly equipped to deal with the very real differences in the two sets of experiences. The 'fantasy child' which may have replaced their own dead or imagined children will almost certainly love them, but also comes to them with a pre-existing biological link to another mother, another father. He or she will, therefore, never fully be theirs and cannot fully replace those lost children. For some adoptive parents, there may be a fear of losing their child and therefore a threat to their secure role as a parent. The natural mother may somehow reclaim her child - in infancy or when reunion occurs.

## What has been found to promote healing?

What successfully promotes healing differs for each person, but some of the common things that have been found to be helpful are: meeting with people who have had similar experiences and hearing one's own experience given respect in the retelling; being heard and having one's experience validated, for example through forums such as the current Parliamentary Inquiry into Past Adoption Practices in NSW; seeking information on birth family, entering into a reunion if desired and having these new relationships supported by people close to you; public recognition of the complex nature of adoption; counselling and support groups.

Any single adoption has as many meanings and truths as there are different parties involved. The experience of loss can be seen to thread its way throughout the various narratives and the different tellings of the same story. Part of our work is to help those affected parties to find ways of living with what they have lost and to find their own way of making sense of their adoption experience.

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